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Theory & Event, Volume 21, Number 1, January 2018, pp. 106-123 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press



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Black Feminist Theory for the Dead and Dying

Patrice D. Douglass

Abstract This essay employs the 2016 police shooting of Korryn Gaines by Baltimore SWAT to ask critical questions about how various conceptualizations of gender violence occlude critical theorizations of how black people die at the hands of the state. Black death is thus taken up as a Black feminist theoretic to challenge the discursive capacity of gender as a singular category to articulate conclusively the suffering of Black gendered subjects. Thus, by examining the narrative maneuvers of the 2017 Women’s March to articulate police violence as a gender concern, this essay demonstrates how the specificities of Blackness are crowded out by the drive towards a collective politic.

“Lady, Black boys getting killed in the South just ain’t news.”
“And girls,” she inserted. “And women and men.”

Toni Cade Bambara¹

She attempted to capture her fate on social media, but her accounts remained frozen. Efforts to expose the deadly force confronting her soon were thwarted, as she and her five-year-old son became surrounded by Baltimore SWAT.² The police had been dispatched to her residence in order to serve a bench warrant for her failure to appear in court for a traffic violation. Imagine a world where Special Weapons and Tactics forces are deployed for routine warrants.³ The absurdity of this steeped in Blackness. The twenty-three-year-old Black mother had inherited a world that was haunted by survival tactics shared in faded whispers of mothers in coffles, on the auction block, stolen away in the night, and those separated from their capacities to mother by the imposition of force. This world bleeds the morbid justification for such tactics by questioning her sanity and mothering. This was not her first encounter with the police. Previously, she had recorded with her camera phone a traffic stop, while her son looked on from the backseat. As the police snatched her from the car, her son assumed charge of the camera to capture what was happening to his mother. His innocence was of no concern to the cop, however. He forcefully removed his mother from their car and arrested her. This incident provided the

backdrop to the standoff with SWAT and the emotions of anger, terror and the determined will to survive that cast a shadow over that fateful 2016 Black August day.⁴ Meanwhile, a neighbor overheard her in her willingness to surrender. A barrage of bullets soon rang out, leaving the young mother dead and her son wounded by a shot in the cheek. The cops insisted that she had threatened to shoot to kill. Thus, a child was made to witness the death of his mother and feel the pain of his own attempted murder at the hands of the police. His mother had always taught him that the police “are always against us.”⁵ Her name was Korryn Gaines.

The death of Korryn and the violent assault of her son, Kodi, were egregious beyond measure. It is a story that bears repeating, although rehashing it seems to only replicate the violence. As a Black woman, Korryn was robbed of any claim to innocence. Her resistance, or submission to the law was rendered void by her positioning as a social and political concern waged against the libidinal economies of life. Most will ask what Korryn did in order to die this way, as if performance figures her death. Others will say “she had a gun” drawing focus again to performance as if behavior can account for why Black women are accosted by the police with such deadly force. As Hortense Spillers asserts, the countless discursive assaults that circumscribe Black gender as the pinnacle of gendered and sexual (non)being, are “confounded identities, a meeting ground of investments and privations in the national treasury of rhetorical weight.”⁶ The psychic value of Black women dying on the fringe of gender provides pivotal context to Spillers proclaiming that, “My country needs me, and if I were not here, I would have to be invented.”⁷ In this respect, my country can be expanded to instead read “the world” given that there are no borderlands with respect to antagonism of Blackness. Though the above section could rewrite itself, replacing “Black women” with the nouns of those inhabiting all spaces of Black gender, trans, non-conforming, cis-, non-binary and otherwise identified. As the context is rewritten with attention to each noun, various truths stay the same, while the experience of those truths morph to give rise to the muddled grammars not available to the dead and always dying. As alluded to in the epigraph of this article, Black erasure is not demarcated by age or by gender. Yet an accounting for the demarcations of these stories starves to be told. Yes, Blackness manifest an abyss of suffering but what are the intricacies of its evasive movements? How is a story told such that the grandiosity of Black death is held at the forefront of concern while respecting that Black death arises in many forms? Where do the structural and experiential collide and coalesce? Can this conversion emerge in theory without tension?

Korryn stands before and is judged by a social and political law that finds any condition of death justifiable “since this repression of

violence constitutes female gender as the locus of both undressed and negligible injury.”⁸ Black female gender, which is always undone, unrealized, and violated, is central to slavery and its afterlife. As a Black woman she carries the antecedents of an arrangement where human cargo is held captive on ships and logged without gender. However, the story does not end nor begin there. Before the hold, the visibility of *her* body served as justification for capture. The slave trade catapulted from the bareness of her bosom, the robustness of her posterior flesh. While the logbooks on the ship became the official record, the absence of gender specification is not the sum total of this equation. From assessing and cataloguing the conditions of genitalia, to the fondling of bodies, and sexual abuse, the sexualization of captives occurred at every level. The ignorance of the fact of Black gender was enacted through the use of gender violence pushed to its unimaginable limits. Such that the captive bore suffering beyond the scope of what was reasoned to animate the structure of gender difference. Its quotidian repetition placed Blackness in an intimate and open relationship with (un)gendering violence, that functions precisely on its constant misnaming and misrecognition.

What also makes the story of Korryn difficult to approach through a singular focus on her behavior is that this narrative repeats itself without end. Black women are killed and assaulted by police at rates higher than any other group of women.⁹ Korryn does not stand-alone. Black women are subjected to forms of police violence most often associated with and thought of as only affecting Black men.¹⁰ However it is far less likely that the cases of Black women become a part of mass public discourse and debate. While the names of a few Black men killed by police in the months preceding Korryn are widely known, their cases commonly discussed, she and other Black women do and did not experience the same public interest.¹¹

However, Black visibility is not without its violent anchors. As David Marriott so poignantly poses about the function of racist images of Black men, “What if the cultural traffic in *images* of the black man as phobic object – beaten, disfigured, lynched – is trauma enough?”¹² The trauma fixed in the always already immanence of the repetition of the violence. The realizations by Black people that not just some die like this but all have the potential to is what Marriott theorizing as the devouring “trauma of representation.”¹³ Juxtaposing the hyper-visibility of the death of Black men against the invisibility and silencing of the death of Black women opens a litany of trap doors.¹⁴ Placing the lens on how Black women die, is not to demand that visual images of their deaths are repeated on social media networks and the nightly news at the behest of the pleasure of viewing Black suffering. In fact, the issue of Black gender is more complex than the dichotomization of death.¹⁵ Furthermore, to bifurcate Black gender, Black women up

against Black men, achieves nothing more than reifying gender stratifications that historically and experientially have never been made available to Black people. By shifting perspective, we might ask, how Black feminist politics account for the dead and dying inclusive of all genders? How can theory maneuver in both a broad range and precise manner to apprehend a structural logic of Black gender not based in the exclusion or inclusion of some to the benefit of analysis of others? In other words, how do we understand the silencing of some Black gendered deaths and the hyper-visibility others as contributing to a structural paradigm of that fortifies existence?

From social media, to mainstream media, and the 2016 Presidential Primaries and Election, the central discussion was what to do with/about the Blacks? The discussion hovering around Black men and violence, while Black women were also dying. Though some, attempted to shed light on the relationship gender played in the state sanctioned murders of all Black people, the focus wavered. The campaign, *#SayHerName: Resisting Police Brutality Against Black Women* formed as what Jared Sexton calls a “compliment” and “corrective” to how Black male gender pervaded perceptions of those accounted for by *#BlackLivesMatter*. Sexton clarifies that,

#BLM would not seem to require modification or specification or expansion against a presumptively male and heterosexual victim of anti-black violence precisely because it is that insistent modification and specification and expansion, the collective enunciation of a tradition of black queer feminist activist intervention and leadership dating back most immediately to the international demonstrations following the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the murder of Trayvon Martin in the summer of 2013.¹⁶

The framers of *#BLM*, Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza and Opal Tometi, as Sexton again points out, did not articulate the mattering of Black life as male, in fact point to its significance for all Black lives. The evasion of gender here creates a double exposure. It illustrates how a focus on Blackness as a general category is incorrectly assumed to solely connote maleness. The conflation of all Black genders as male, I argue, does not masculinize anti-black violence, but misaligns it as inherently without gender, since maleness is assumed as structurally unbound by the suffering of gender violence. Furthermore, it reveals that violence deracinates Black gender into an unrecognizable state, such that what is seen does not account for all that has occurred.

I contend that the encounters between law enforcement and Black women illuminate the openness and gratuity of (un)gendering violence. By examining police and policing, it is not my intent to hold these encounters or spaces as exceptional. It is instead to show how

these encounters demonstrate very explicitly the gendering of Black women as inhabiting a space of violence that exceeds the assumptive parameters of the terms of gender. The particularity of this emerges both through the gratuity of death and, most central to the point here, in the aftermath as political discourse attempts to bring coherence to the structure that makes such deaths possible. Korrryn's death brings this closely into view by animating how "the grammar of antagonism breaks in on the mendacity of conflict,"¹⁷ as described by Frank B. Wilderson, III. Korrryn died at the height of a political moment fueled by discontent with the state of policing and the assumed increased hyper-frequency of police brutality. However, there was a gaping silence around the death of Korrryn. Rather than asserting why Korrryn should be seen as exemplary to the concerns of the political dissent waged against law enforcement practices, I argue it is more critical to hone into what theoretical and political maneuvers force state violence against Black women into discursive boxes that insist on employing the logic of subjectivity to account for the object status of their suffering. Furthermore, and with respect to Wilderson's claim above, the push here is to think about gender within the cognitive disruption that is Blackness. This shift illustrates how Black death animates the discourse of gender violence while rendering the relationship between gender and antiblackness void through its assumptive underpinnings. This is an intentional maneuver to work with and through the wake work¹⁸ of other activist, scholars, and employ Blackness as theorem that is not excessive to the concern of gender but essential to its operative modalities.

Black death, which symbolizes much more than absence, is politicized here through a genealogy of Black feminism. It functions as an operative mode of analysis to engage what is both specific and general about the formulations of anti-black gender violence. It takes serious Black feminism as both a corrective to the assumptive logic of non-black gender concerns and a theory of violence that expands and challenges the manner in which gendered violence is assumed to appear in the world. The necessity for this corrective is located in what Sylvia Wynter describes as the codification of gender concerns within a feminist framework that circumvented and ignored the "negro question," such that gender functions as a genre of Man, and "above all, its overrepresentation of its well-being as that of the human species."¹⁹ The implications of this arrangement are immense given that the "well-being" of Man is located precisely in the duality this article is highlighting with respect to Korrryn. It is both in the death and the lack of discursive capacity to bring redress to this death that gender as a genre of Man is fortified. For Hartman, "the incomplete project of freedom, and the precarious life of the ex-slave, a condition defined by the vulnerability to premature death and to gratuitous acts of violence,"²⁰ is where

the necessity to reanimate the lives of the dead emerges. This framing also refuses the demand for conclusiveness and rests with the tensions of violences that cannot be named. Lastly, Black death demands critical perspectives that disallow identity to codify what it means to inhabit the world of Black gender. This is to say, it is a refusal to allow the grammar of suffering that lends discursive capacity to the terms of race, gender and/or sexuality to crowd out that which cannot be said about the extent of antiblackness. By focusing gender through the scope of death, the point is to refuse binaries and dichotomies, and widen the scope of engagement to think about gender within the broader political concerns of Blackness as a political ontological category.

Not all Women are Women

The emergence of a crisis takes on multiple expressions. 2016 proved to be a discursively explosive year. To many the crisis began with the politics of the presidential election, culminating in with the formal election of the 45th President of the United States. So many jolted by the shock and awe of the election of a president whose beliefs about race and gender read like a nineteenth century legal ruling on the status of slaves. To the self-proclaimed, nasty women,²¹ who began 2017 protesting the results of the election and gathering in support of women and gender rights. The Women's March on Washington, and other tandem marches, were held on January 22, 2017, the day after the 45th Presidential Inauguration, and were attended by millions of people worldwide. After the march, many boasted of no arrests or contentious encounters with the police.²² Referencing policing in this instance is not benign. 2016, and many years prior, were set ablaze by videos of Black people being murdered by state agents igniting fervent protests.²³ Each time, large numbers of protesters were arrested, shifting the dominant focus to the supposed looting and vandalism of the protesters rather than a discussion about the permanence of Black death. Given the contexts of the prior years, the antagonism of Blackness was a haunting in waiting at the Women's March as well as during the 2016 Presidential Election. Though crisis to some is politics as usual to others. The juxtaposing of the Women's March with the contention of Black demands is not coincidental. It points to the manner theories of gender and gendering situates the context of Black violence outside of or in tension with its concerns. As with the 2016 Presidential Election and the dominant affect expressed thereafter a critical engagement with the state of Black lives was violently supplanted with a perceived susceptibility to gratuitous death for those not figured by Blackness.

The premise of centering celebration during the Women's March deblackened and unraced the scales of concern. For Blackness, this political moment encapsulated centuries of mourning. Arguably Black

gendered death animated the anxiety and political anxiousness that framed 2016 and the shift into 2017. The “Guiding Vision and Definition of Principles” for the Women’s March were written in the purest sense of coalitional politics, focusing on inclusion and representation in all its grandeur. Marking the foundations that inaugurate this political coming together, it states, “We are empowered by the legions of revolutionary leaders who paved the way for us to march, and acknowledge those around the globe who fight for our freedoms. We honor these women and so many more. They are #WHYWEMARCH.”²⁴ The names of Ella Baker, Shirley Chisholm, Angela Davis, Miss Major Griffin Gracy, bell hooks, Marsha P. Johnson, Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith, and Harriet Tubman, are amongst the list of many names that follow this statement. The framing of the vision statement, the calling upon these women, and the visuality of the march all sit in tension. Stating the names of Black women who have struggled against structural violence alone cannot reconcile the suffering of Black women.

The names of living and dead Black trans and cis-gendered women are meant to represent women who contributed to a Black feminist politics that has arrived at the point of celebrating coalition through difference. I contend that these names are called upon in bad faith. It alludes to an articulation of political association that assumes finitude with the political figures, activists and scholars that galvanized many Black feminist concerns. More to this point, Black feminism is posited as maintaining an invested in a division of Black genders. Little space is provided, outside of the use of the phrasing “communities of color,” to formulate a narrative to account for gender violence that totalizes Blackness across genders. Thus, the march cannot through theory or performance, grapple with how the sexualization of Black gender binds a suffering *community*. The Women’s March cannot think gendering as a violence that disorients Blackness. As such, the privileging of coalition as a unifying point overshadows and ignores the specificities of Black gender. Those bones are not my feminism.²⁵

The Women’s March is emblematic of a tendency at the heart of the desire for cross-racial coalition, which asserts that space can and should be held equally for all women, while, Black women are dying in ways that are structurally unimaginable for most other women. The vision states that, “We believe in accountability and justice for police brutality and ending racial profiling and targeting of communities of color and Indigenous peoples.”²⁶ Who are the “we” of this statement? Police violence and its relationship to gender violence are not explanatory without a concentrated exegesis. Especially given the fact that the subjection of Black and Native cis-gender and trans women to gendered violence at the hands of the state is statistically higher than all other women. The absence of a critical reflection on this continuity demonstrates a historical continuum of violence at the heart

of U.S antagonisms. Both settler colonialism and slavery underwrite the imagery of this violence. This transfer does more than produce increased vulnerability. It conditions the political ontology of being, that triangulates the discursive capacities for Humans to locate their suffering within redressable terms, while Black and Native peoples wallow in the irreconcilable antagonisms and conflicts of the libidinal economies of violence that situate them in this world. Yet the names of the Black women whose deaths catalyzed the tensions so viscerally felt in politics are painfully absent in the above framework. It generalizes a very real and specific set of urgencies. Rather than seeking visibility by adding these women to a list, I argue an analysis of a structural paradigm that pervades this gratuity, making it invisible to the central analysis of gender violence, is essential. Why not march for women who died at the hand of the state? What does the framing of gender justice by the Women's March have to say for the dead and dying? Where is the march for Korryn?

The conceptual framework of how gender violence and the demand for justice became an operative term undergirds the bones of the feminist practices reproduced by the Women's March.²⁷ In articulating the discursive framing of the feminist-based antiviolence movement, which gained traction in the early 1990s, Beth E. Ritchie outlines how the mainstream narrative of the experiences of gender violence as equal for all women betrayed reality. Ritchie argues, the dominant perception that gender violence can happen to any woman is in fact "dangerous." This approach was not supported by any empirical data, which illustrated vividly that Black and other women of color suffer gender violence, both interpersonal and state, at much higher rates than white women. Ritchie stages her intervention through the work of Black feminists and activists whose pivotal work in the antiviolence movement became overshadowed by the demands of white feminism. Furthermore, this narrative hinged upon the falsely held belief that there was unity amongst women across racial and class lines.

Ritchie outlines a dual erasure produced from the insistence on reading all women through the same narrative of violence. Ritchie argues, "a white middle-class woman... consumed the greater proportion of attention in the literature, intervention strategies were based on her needs, she was featured in public awareness campaigns, and she was represented by the national leaders on the issue of violence against women."²⁸ The argument goes on to state that "worst yet, when...women of color are victimized, the problem is cast as something other than a case of gender violence."²⁹ Thus, women of color become racially othered by white feminist theories. The counters of race are positioned as excessive to the constitution of the arrangements of gender. Furthermore, the narrative of gender violence became relegated to the interpersonal, based solely on the common experiences

of wealthy white women. This framing was predicated on a refusal to privilege the intimate relationship between state violence and women of color, specifically Black women, as constitutive of gender violence. Ritchie contends, "we must revisit our analytic frame and develop a much more complex and contextualized analysis of gender violence, one rooted in an understanding of the historical and contemporary social processes that have differentially affected women of color."³⁰ I however would suggest that Ritchie points to a distinctiveness of Black gender that is not appeased by advancing a critique that frames Black women with respect to all women of color.

The conceptual framework of women of color, I argue, similarly performs an erasure of the antagonistic relationship Black genders hold with the structuring paradigm of gender. At the level of experience women of color, as a broad association, are subjected to violence at the intersections of at least their race and gender. However, the structural positioning of Blackness blurs the lines of difference demonstrating an intimate proximity to violence that troubles the water of gender as an explanatory category.³¹ Andrea J. Ritchie explains how the assumption of gender transgression places women of color at an increased risk of experiencing police brutality. Ritchie argues,

women framed as 'masculine' – including African American women, who are routinely 'masculinized' through systemic racial stereotypes – are consistently treated by the police as potentially violent, predatory, or noncompliant regardless of their actual conduct and circumstances, no matter how old, young, disabled, small, or ill.³²

Black women here representing a convergence of supposed gender lines. The significance of this gesture by Ritchie is that it hones into the peculiar relationship between Blackness and gender. Gender here is not accounted for by how Black women identify or perform. Nor can it be taken as misrecognition of *real* gender by the police. Black gender occupies a position that is captive to a libidinal economy of *différance*.³³ Theorizing the power that *disorients* Black gender deconstructs the assumptive logic of gender violence. What is revealed is that Black gender functions as a demarcation of difference at the level of existence.

Ritchie goes on to offer a critical analysis of beliefs held by police officers that rely on racialized and gendered preconceptions of women of color to justify the use of force. Ritchie writes,

Use of force against women of color is also uniquely informed by racialized and gendered stereotypes – officers often appear to be acting based on perceptions of Black women as "animalistic"

women possessing superhuman force, Latina women as “hot-tempered mamas,” Asian women as “devious,” knife-wielding martial arts experts, and so on.³⁴

Although these descriptions are presented in a list, the assumptive framing of them are not the same. Latina and Asian women are portrayed as hypersexualized and deviant variants of womanhood, while Black women are not seen as women at all. Black women are positioned outside of the scope of humanness. Though, I would caution to suggest that the hum-animal distinction does not mark the essence of Black feminine gender. Instead the description of Black women given above situates Black identity into a void. As Zakiyyah Iman Jackson critically argues, “...at the moment when the conception of ‘the human’ was reorganized such that humanity was understood as coincident with ‘the animal,’ humane discourse relying on this new understanding simultaneously reformulated blackness as inferior to both “the human and “the animal.”³⁵ Jackson demonstrates how the animal possesses a conceptual framework in a manner Blackness is barred from. The Black, can be everything and nothing simultaneously. Blackness is gendered through violence that structures it outside of humanity and defines the perimeters of what it means to *be* for the Human and its discontents.³⁶

The archive of gender is structurally anti-black. Its assumptive logic, whether explicit in its presentation or not, maintains that all women have the same gender. This orientation of thought does more than render Black gender invisible or silent. It makes it conceptually impossible to think of gender violence as orienting more than the realm of gender. Rather than engaging a politic fixated on what binds women together in life, I want to draw focus to what separates Black women in death. What creates the conditions of (im)possibility for Black women to die like Korryn Gaines? How might we augment the lens to theorize the issue of Black gender as much larger than it appears? Blackness brings into focus a paradigm of existence that rests on a gratuitous structure of violence that unhinges Black people from a possessive relation to categories of identity. Anti-black violence bleeds across demarcations of difference. When examining the contexts of Black gender, what emerges through theory is Blackness obscures the intensity and scope of violence such that Black suffering becomes indiscernible from violence experienced by others. Thus, the intimate relationship between Black gender and violence becomes a crisis for non-blacks, as this structural proximity is assumed as applicable to all. The Women’s March principles are exemplary of the transfusion of myth and reality. As Saidiya Hartman so critically poses, “How can we understand the racialized engenderment of the black female captive in terms other than deficiency or lack in relation to normative conditions and instead understand

this production of gender in the context of very difference economies of power, property, kinship, race, and sexuality?"³⁷ The implications of this provocation by Hartman are a critical lens to understanding the policing of Black women³⁸ and the generative possibilities of theorizing gender through Blackness.

So, what does the lens of Blackness offer introspections into gender? In the same respect as the proclamation by Beth E. Ritchie that is it dangerous to produce theory for all women, can the same be said for Blackness? The short answer to latter is, no. While there is no place in history where all women have stood subjected equally to violence, there is such a place for the black, the hold of the slave ship. I would like to privilege an analysis of the hold and the world produced from it as predicated on Black social and political death. The hold is marked by the putridness of unattended matter. A critical theory of Blackness rooted in the urgency and immanence of that death must attend to the specter of Black gender unhinged by a dispossessed status. As Jared Sexton posits, "The slave's cause is the cause of another world in and on the ruins of this one, in the end of its ends."³⁹ Black gender as a theorem, not a thing, dismantles the predicate of gender. When gender and Blackness converge, Black people are found wavering in an ocean of violence. The core of Black feminist concerns is how to account for the gravity of gender violences that lack a proper name.

Is Gender for the Captive?

There is a question announcing itself through the halls and silos of the academy, "does Afro-pessimism adequately deal with the question of black gender?" More aptly, the concern appears to wonder, what can Afro-pessimism say about structure of Black gendered suffering? Is it theoretical silent on this point, when in all other iterations it is theoretically quite loud? Afro-pessimism,⁴⁰ as a theory, arose in conversation between Saidiya Hartman and Frank B. Wilderson, III as they worked to carve out a space for Black theorizing, which Hartman terms the position of the unthought.⁴¹ Drawing on theory and language of Black feminist theorists like Hartman and Hortense J. Spillers, Wilderson later describes Afro-pessimists as, "theorists of Black positionality who share Fanon's insistence that, though Blacks are indeed sentient beings, the structure of the entire world's semantic field – regardless of culture or national discrepancies – 'leaving' as Fanon would say 'existence by the wayside' – is sutured by anti-Black solidarity."⁴² Wilderson cautioned against upholding Afro-pessimism as a school of thought. In fact, there are many scholars and activist engaging Afro-pessimism worldwide that carry out the possibilities of its explanatory potentials. Jared Sexton has further described that,

Afro-Pessimism is both an epistemological and an ethical project, and these two tributaries of thought converge in the carefully navigated stream of consciousness whose abstraction enables a *theorem* of political ontology deduced or derived from the cutting edge of black studies: that infinitely narrowing margin of practical-theoretical activity that provides us with weapons.⁴³

Afro-pessimism for the intent of this argument here, provides the weapons for an unwavering analysis of Blackness that “raises the question of whether gender... [is] at all applicable to the condition of the captive community.”⁴⁴

Insofar as there is a mappable concern about gender and Afro-pessimism, a primary issue lies with how the theory is thought to employ the concept of “ungendering” as presented by Spillers. Afro-pessimism is visibly indebted to the work of Spillers as represented through its conceptual maneuvers, language, and citational practices. Spillers argues,

Under these conditions, we lose at least *gender* difference in the *outcome*, and the female body and the male body become a territory of cultural and political maneuver, not at all gender-related, gender-specific. But this body, at least from the point of view of the captive community, focuses a private and particular space, at which point of convergence biological, sexual, social, cultural, linguistic, ritualistic, and psychological fortunes join.⁴⁵

This scene illustrating the hold on bodies made into flesh. The question becomes, what does Afro-pessimism have to say about the “she” of this condition? The “she,” which Spillers contends, is “female flesh ‘ungendered’” and “offers a praxis and a theory, a text for living and dying, a method for reading both through their diverse mediations.”⁴⁶ The assumption is that Afro-pessimism theorizes the “she” into a space of unmaterring, a void lacking significance. Considering what Spillers argues above, such would seem to belie the intent of theorizing “ungendering” as a structural component of captivity. However, I would suggest there is a conceptual misstep that buttresses concerns about Afro-pessimism and gender. Afro-pessimism theorizes at the level of structure. It is concerned with how bodies are positioned in the world. While performance is important to the imperative concerns of studies of race and gender, Afro-pessimism does not stake an investment in mediating Blackness “as a variously and unconsciously interpellated identity or as a conscious social actor.”⁴⁷ In other words, the structural components of captivity for Afro-pessimism machinate with or without the consent and/or actions of captives. Afro-pessimism also is centrally concerned with theorizing anti-black violence as that which lacks the discursive capacity to be named. Thus, it would seem

quite impossible to definitively assert that the violence Afro-pessimism theorizes is in fact not gender violence ungendered Black. Such cannot be said.

I would like to bring attention to the words italicized by Spillers in the breakout quote above. Together it reads, *Gender in the outcome*. However, let us rephrase this into question. What is gender in the outcome of theory? Answers evade a direct response to this question. If we parse out gender, outcome, and theory each term has the potential for multiple inferences. Gender, for the gendered and ungendered inflect upon the separation of worlds. As Spillers argues, “the gendered female *exists* for the male, we might say that the ungendered female – in an amazing stroke of pansexual potential – might be invaded/raided by another woman or man.”⁴⁸ Existence for the gendered female is a degraded status constituted by patriarchy. The invasion/raiding of the ungendered female exposes the logic of patriarchy as conceptually inept at balancing the weight of being possessed by all genders *and* the term gender itself. Outcome, in this respect lacks finality, demonstrating the repetition of an antagonistic interplay of worlds. Although discourses like that produced in support of the Women’s March, would suggest the outcomes of these worlds are mended, lending its nuances to political coalitions, such is a farce. Theory then has the potential to provide a lens to think through and across the division of degraded existence and the status of complete dispossession. Just as it is within reason to ask Afro-pessimism to locate gender, the reverse, I argue, demands greater theoretical concern. Do the concerns of gender, adequately account for the structural concerns of Afro-pessimism? Does Afro-pessimism deracinate gender or is Black gender obliterated prior to theory by the violence Afro-pessimism takes on as the orbit of its concerns?

In order to approach these questions, we must contend with the death of Korryn. Empathy could not find her. She made videos and wrote statements that spoke against the power of the police. She told her five-year-old son the cops were trying to kill him. Where was her concern for his innocence? She illegally covered her license plate. She drove around town *looking* for an altercation with the police. She talked back. She filmed her body being violated. She fought back. She did not appear in court. She refused to open her door to allow Baltimore SWAT to serve her a bench warrant. She had a gun. She stood her ground. She was called paranoid. She was determined by public opinion to be mentally ill. She was made to bear the burden of proof that she did not deserve to die this way. Where is the support of her persistence?⁴⁹ Where is the narrative for Korryn asserting that no behavior constitutes a justification for gender violence? Where is the march for her?

Black feminism and Afro-pessimism converge for Korryn. Each is pessimistic about the explanatory power of gender to confront the

entrails of Black gender that are “not at all gender-related gender-specific.”⁵⁰ Each offering an unflinching analysis of the world that rendered her vulnerability absolute, the world she resisted, and the world that misunderstood and failed her.⁵¹ The afterlife of slavery breeds the necessity to remember Black women, like Korryn, so she is not held as collateral damage of an articulation of gender that theorizes her into a void. Black women are subjected to brutal physical, sexual, discursive, systemic, and structural violence. Korryn, and all those gendered Black, are “bound by the fetters of sentiment, held captive by the vestiges of the past, and cast into a legal condition of subjection – these features limn the circumstances of an anomalous, misbegotten, and burdened subject no longer enslaved, but not yet free.”⁵² Gender is a category for Humans. The violence of ungendering is a domain for the captive, those who died in the hold of the ship and continue dying by the wayside of gender.

Notes

1. Toni Cade Bambara, *Those Bones Are Not My Child* (New York: Vintage, 1999), 274.
2. Korryn was also mother to a young daughter who was not present at this time.
3. Reports about Korryn having a shotgun were widespread. For an example see, Wesley Lowery, “Korryn Gaines, cradling child and shotgun, is fatally shot by police” in *The Washington Post*, August 2, 2016, available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2016/08/02/korryn-gaines-is-the-ninth-black-woman-shot-and-killed-by-police-this-year/?utm_term=.1b7c31cf7a0b [n.d].
4. For more on Black August, its history and political premises, see Malcolm X Grassroots Movement, “The History of Black August,” available at <https://mxgm.org/blackaugust/blackaugust-history/> [Accessed March 29, 2016].
5. An expanded version of this quote and dialogue can be found in German Lopez’s “Baltimore County Police Shot Korryn Gaines – and a 5-year-old was caught in the crossfire” in *Vox*, August 4, 2016, available at <http://www.vox.com/2016/8/2/12351500/korryn-gaines-baltimore-police-shooting-video> [n.d.].
6. Hortense J. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book” in *Black, White and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003) 203.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) 80.
9. For a broader engagement with relationship between black women, police violence, and rate of incarceration see Beth E. Ritchie, *Arrested Justice: Black Women, Violence, and America’s Prison Nation* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).

10. See Joy James, *Resisting State Violence: Radicalism, Gender, and Race in U.S. Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1996) 30–31.
11. Cis-gendered Black men and women are not being reference here as the only Black genders or representative of the only Black genders subjected to wanton police violence. In fact, Black transwomen are far more likely to encounter repeated gender violence at the hands of the police.
12. David Marriott, *On Black Men* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000) 13.
13. Ibid.
14. The point of this statement is to argue that Black people being accountable to one another is not the essential to confronting the violence described here. While it is arguably quite important, I contend it will not stop the killing machine.
15. For more on this argument see Jared Sexton, “Afro Pessimism: The Unclear Word” in *Rhizomes* Number 29 (2016) 1–21, available at <https://doi.org/10.20415/rhiz/029/e02> [Accessed April 1, 2017].
16. Ibid.
17. Frank B. Wilderson III, *Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010) 5.
18. For an engagement with the concept wake work, see Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016). Sharpe employs the term “wake work,” to describe the process of “plotting, mapping, and collecting the archive of the everyday of Black immanent and imminent death, and in tracking the ways we resist, rupture, and disrupt that immanence and imminence aesthetically and materially” (16). The magnanimity of wake work makes it devoid of an epistemological cartography. The necessity to plot, map, and collective an archive is resisting against the impossibilities of Black life. Yet the erasure continues as theory unfolds. Thus, waking the dead, by bringing theoretical form to their suffering, happens through tension. The persistence of Black erasure engulfs theory even as it attempts to take hold and account for the unseen liminal spaces of Blackness. Theorizing in black is delicate in nature, as theory itself can replicate structures of anti-blackness that mark, through naming, Black immanent and imminent death as benign considering its intense frequency and replication. For Sharpe, the wake is a rupture set in motion by the infinite remnants left behind by a slave ship. Thus, *In the Wake* offers multiple definitions of the wake, such that what it is and the work necessary to attend to its crises refuses easy compartmentalization into a thing or a singular object of analysis. The wake can enliven a “state of wakefulness,” alerting attention to what goes unseen. The wake demands that the work taken up to account for its excessive mendacity, and reproduction throughout space and time, place focus on the contexts of Blackness. It requires careful attention to disallow what sutures Black erasure to go unseen.
19. Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument” in *CR: The New Centennial Review* Volume 3, Number 3 (2003) 313.

20. Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts" in *Small Axe* Volume 12, Number 2 (June 2008) 4.
21. The term "nasty woman," was taken up by a moniker by some women following a 2016 Presidential debate, where Donald J. Trump referred to Hilary Clinton as a nasty woman. Nasty woman can represent, of many things, a progressive political woman reclaiming the assumed deviance of her behaviors.
22. See Brooke Seipel, "Women's March on Washington yields zero arrests: report" in *The Hill*, January 22, 2017, available at <http://thehill.com/blogs/blog-briefing-room/news/315529-womens-march-on-washington-yields-zero-arrests-report> [n.d.], and Zeba Blay, "Before You Celebrate The Zero Arrest At the Women's March... White women in pink hats were never going to be met with riot police" in *The Huffington Post*, January, 23, 2017, available at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/before-you-celebrate-the-zero-arrests-at-the-womens-march_us_588617e4e4b0e3a7356a3ee4 [n.d.].
23. See Julia Craven, "More Than 250 Black people killed by the police in 2016" in *The Huffington Post*, January 1, 2017, available at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/black-people-killed-by-police-america_us_577da633e4b0c590f7e7fb17 [n.d.].
24. "Women's March Guiding Vision & Discipline of Principles" in *The Women's March*, available at <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/584086c7be6594762f5ec56e/t/587ffb31d2b857e5d49dcd4f/1484782386354/WMW+Guiding+Vision+%26+Definition+of+Principles.pdf> [Accessed March 20, 2017].
25. This statement makes reference to, *Those Bones are Not My Child*, the posthumously published final novel from Toni Cade Bambara.
26. *Ibid.* 2.
27. "We believe Gender Justice is Racial Justice is Economic Justice. We must create a society in which all women—including Black women, Indigenous women, poor women, immigrant women, disabled women, Muslim women, lesbian, queer and trans women—are free and able to care for and nurture themselves and their families, however they are formed, in safe and healthy environments free from structural impediments (*Ibid.*).
28. Beth E. Ritchie, "A Black Feminist Reflection on the Antiviolence Movement" in *Signs*, Volume 25, Number 4 (2000) 1135.
29. *Ibid.* 1135.
30. *Ibid.* 1136.
31. See Greg Thomas, "PROUD FLESH Inter/Views: Sylvia Wynter" in *ProudFlesh: New Afrikan Journal of Culture, Politics, and Consciousness* Number 4 (2006) 1-36. In this his interview Wynter argues, "Our struggle as Black Women has to do with the deconstruction of the genre; with the displacement of the genre of the human of 'Man,' of which the Black population group - men, women and children - must function as the negation" (25).

32. Andrea J. Ritchie, "Law Enforcement Violence against Women of Color" in *Color of Violence: The INCITE! Anthology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016) 143.
33. See Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, Alan Bass trans. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982). Here, Derrida explains that, "the word or concept of *différance*, or rather to let it impose itself upon me in its neographism, although as we shall see, *différance* is literally neither a word nor a concept. And I insist upon the word *sheaf* for two reasons. On the one hand, I will not be concerned, as I might have been, with describing a history and narrating its stages, text by text, context by context, demonstrating the economy that each time imposed this graphic disorder; rather, I will be concerned with the *general system of this economy*. On the other hand, the word *sheaf* seems to mark more appropriately that the assemblage to be proposed has the complex structure of a weaving, an interlacing which permits the different threads and different lines of meaning - or of force - to go off again in different directions, just as it is always ready to tie itself up with others" (3).
34. Ritchie, "Law Enforcement Violence against Women of Color" 147.
35. Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, "Animal: New Directions in the Theorization of Race and Posthumanism" in *Feminist Studies* Volume 39, Number 3 (2013) 678.
36. This reference highlights the interplay with the social and political lives of white and non-blacks as occupying a relation with one another predicated on Black exclusion. As Wynter argues, "... there was always a coming together of the whites, and so on, versus the Blacks. I had to realize there wasn't any "Third World" thing. EVERYONE ASSUMED THAT THE BLACK WAS SOMEONE WHO WAS THERE; THEY HAD A STRUGGLE; YOU JOIN THEIR STRUGGLE; AND YOU PUSH THEM OVER AND MOVE OVER THEM TO THE TOP." See Thomas, "PROUD FLESH Inter/Views: Sylvia Wynter" 29, original emphasis.
37. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection* 100.
38. The use of "Black women" here is positioned to theorize with these provocations posed by Saidiya Hartman. "Can we employ the term 'woman' and yet remain vigilant that "all women do not have the same gender?... By assuming that woman designates a known referent, an a priori unity, a precise bundle of easily recognizable characteristics, traits, and dispositions, we fail to attend to the contingent and disjunctive production of the category." See *Ibid.* 99.
39. Jared Sexton, "All Black Everything" in *e-flux* Number 79, (2017), available at <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/79/94158/all-black-everything/> [Accessed April 3, 2017].
40. This use of Afro-pessimism differs in reference and form from the usages of afropessimism by journalists who employed the term in the 1980s to mark the state of sub-Saharan Africa as beyond the point of political and economic redemption.
41. See Saidiya Hartman and Frank B. Wilderson III, "The Position of the Unthought" in *Qui Parle* Volume 13, Number 2 (Spring/Summer 2003) 183-201.

42. Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black* 58.
43. Sexton, "Afro-Pessimism: The Unclear Word."
44. Hartman and Wilderson, "Position of the unthought" 18. In this example, Hartman poses this question speaking in reference to the work of Hortense J. Spillers.
45. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" 206, original emphasis.
46. Ibid. 207.
47. Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black* 58.
48. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" 222.
49. This question makes reference to the campaign "Nevertheless, she persisted," which refashioned the justification given by Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell for silencing Senator Elizabeth Warren. In opposition to the nomination of Senator Jeff Sessions for Attorney General, Senator Warren read a statement by Corretta Scott King speaking out against Session and his racist actions to suppress the voting rights act and the rights of Black voters. Midway through her remarks Senator McConnell claimed that her statements impugned the character of Senator Sessions. McConnell later stated, "She had appeared to violate the rule. She was warned. She was given an explanation. Nevertheless, she persisted," which became a rallying cry for women who historically have and currently fight back against injustice. For more, see Amy B. Wang, "'Nevertheless, she persisted' becomes new battle cry after McConnell silences Elizabeth Warren" in *The Washington Post*, February 8, 2017, available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/02/08/nevertheless-she-persisted-becomes-new-battle-cry-after-mcconnell-silences-elizabeth-warren/?utm_term=.c607ac0903f3 [n.d.].
50. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" 206.
51. See Uri Talib, "Korryn Gaines, Assata Shakur, & Harriet Tubman: Militant Black Feminism & Human Liberation" in *Odyssey*, August 16, 2016, available at <https://www.theodysseyonline.com/korryn-gaines-assata-shakur-harriet-tubman-armed-resistance-black-feminist-future> [n.d.].
52. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection* 206.